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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000023

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [GB](#)

SUBJECT: GABON: BONGO'S NEW GOVERNMENT LOOKS A LOT LIKE THE OLD

REF: A. 08 LIBREVILLE 0488

[1](#)B. LIBREVILLE 016 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Poloff Leslie Doumbia for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Following weeks of public hints that a government shakeup was imminent, Gabonese President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba announced a modest cabinet reshuffle January 14. The already-bloated cabinet grew from 43 to 48 positions (including deputy ministers). The new government, while it does include a handful of new faces, is comprised mostly of the same cast of characters playing the same roles: Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong kept his job, as did the foreign, finance and defense ministers. Bongo's promised "opening" of government to a broader range of opposition figures did not occur. There were, however, a few surprises for close observers of the Gabonese political scene. These may indicate more changes to come. END SUMMARY.

MORE OF THE SAME

[1](#)2. (C) Bongo had trumpeted his desire for change in several speeches, including a New Year's Eve address to the nation in which he leveled blistering criticism of his own government's ineffectiveness in meeting the needs of the people. He publicly charged Prime Minister Eyeghe Ndong with proposing a new government of action and "opening" to the political opposition (much of which has already been co-opted into Bongo's broad coalition government).

[1](#)3. (C) According to the government-sponsored daily newspaper, L'Union, the new government announced January 14 is comprised of a "combination of (members of the presidential) majority, representatives of the opposition, and members of civil society. In reality, despite a few new faces, many of the key players in the government have maintained their positions. Despite criticism of his failed "road map" to improve government performance, Prime Minister Ndong survived the reshuffle, along with, recently appointed Foreign Minister Paul Toungui and Finance Minister Blaise Louembe (ref. A). Long-standing Minister of Defense Ali Bongo and Minister of Interior Andre Mba Obama also remain in place, as do the vast majority of their cabinet colleagues. A detailed list of the new cabinet will be sent in septel.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

[1](#)4. (C) Bongo's decree did bring some relative unknowns into the political arena. Newcomers include Minister of Development, Public Performance, and Statistics Anacleto Bissielo and Deputy Minister of Forest, Water, and Fishing Economy Fabien Mere. Neither are members of the political

establishment, and both have frequently criticized the government. Bissielo, a professor, and Mere, a lawyer, have worked closely with the Embassy for a number of years on various issues. When contacted about their appointments, both claimed that there were completely surprised. Anaclet said he found out about his new position on the evening news.

Anaclet was a participant in the International Visitor (IV) program in 2006 and is expected to give a speech at the Embassy's Martin Luther King Day event scheduled for January 20. Mere participated in a panel discussion at a public diplomacy event centered on the recent U.S. presidential elections.

15. (C) Former Minister of Higher Education Dieudonne Pambo, Minister of Scientific Research and Technological Development Albert Ondo Ossa and Deputy Minister of Public Function Gisele Eyang Ntoutome were among the handful of officials dropped from cabinet completely. More surprisingly, Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Jean-Boniface Assele, considered a long-shot contender to lead Gabon in the post-Bongo era, was also ousted. Assele, though ostensibly in an opposition party, is a hard-nosed political organizer and a proven survivor of Gabonese politics. He is also the brother of the president's former wife, singer Patience Dabany. Assele's political career should not be considered over.

16. (C) Other victims in the reshuffle may be nearing the end of their political careers. These include senior figures who were not dismissed, but who appear to be further marginalized. Former Minister of Tourism Idriss Ngari, a career army officer and former defense minister hailing from

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the same ethnic group and home province of President Bongo, was once considered by some to be a possible contender for the presidency. His political standing, however, has waned since 1999 when he was replaced as Minister of Defense by his long-time rival Ali Bongo, the president's son. Ngari has now been named Minister of Health, a position often held by women in Gabon, and a perceived demotion. Also demoted was Richard Onuviet, once a powerful Minister of Mining and Petroleum, who is now named the Minister of Decentralization and Urban Policy. Onuviet had a reputation for both corruption and prickliness when he was Minister of Mining and Petroleum. Former Minister of Justice Martin Mabala, a non-lawyer who butted heads with some of the professionals in his ministry, was handed the less-significant Ministry of Parliamentary Relations and Constitutional Institutions.

COMMENT

17. (C) This reshuffle represents at best an incremental change in government's profile, perhaps slightly strengthening the position of Minister of Defence Ali Bongo in succession jockeying, slightly broadening the number of political tendencies represented in cabinet, and slightly increasing the number of ministers with technical expertise and a background in civil society. The wholesale change many Gabonese believe is necessary to address the rising cost of living and the deterioration in government services simply did not occur. There are rumors that further changes are in the offing, but for now the aging President has chosen to rearrange, not reform, his under-performing government. End Comment.
REDDICK